

## An Imperiled Icon: Postal Service Looking Hard at Five-Day Delivery Schedule

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Editor

It is a piece of America that has survived rain, sleet and snow as one of the country's most valued public services, and that familiar blue mailbox isn't likely to go away anytime soon. But change is in the wind. As soon as possible, the U.S. Postal Service wants to start delivering the goods five days a week instead of six, and eventually close down some of those little brick buildings with the American flags fluttering outside.

Simply put, the Internet has made what was once a vital form of communication — paper correspondence — far less vital. The recession hasn't helped either.

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"Ten years ago, the average household received five pieces of mail every day. Today it receives four and by 2020, that number will fall to three," the Postal Service said in a recent report to one of its regulators. It's a pretty basic equation. Cutting street deliveries to Monday-through-Friday will save more than \$3 billion a year, the report says, and allow the Postal Service to rebalance its operations in a digital age when many customers are keeping in touch via e-mail and text messages. Other cost savings are also being studied, because doing nothing would open up a \$238 billion budget gap for the self-supporting independent agency over the next 10 years, the Postal Service says.

Surveys suggest the general public is open to the idea of doing away with Saturday deliveries. After all, express mail service would continue seven days a week, and there is no specific plan, at this point, to close any number of post office buildings. Even so, the plan got a chilly reception in Congress, which would have to sign off on the schedule change. In the U.S. House, 49 lawmakers have co-sponsored a resolution urging the Postal Service to continue six-day-a-week deliveries. And when Postmas-



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ter General John E. Potter told a Senate committee he had no authority to make a limited test run of his plan, Sen. Dick Durbin briskly informed him, "Well, we make the laws here. I'd like to see if those studies [of cost savings] hold up." The idea is to test five-day deliveries in a handful of states, according to *FederalTimes.com*.

And if the big idea becomes reality, will bills get paid late, especially over long holiday weekends? Will some letter carriers lose work, and can Facebook and other social media ever take the place of personalized mail? "More and more marketers are moving back to the basics," according to a recent post on Pitney Bowes' Postal Updates Blog. "Direct mail may never be utilized for the mass mailings of yesteryear — but first class and standard class mailings with postal discounts are a pretty good runner-up for revenue."

Beyond the dollars and cents, there is a feeling that something important, intangible in some respects, is about to be taken

away. "We the people are on a slippery slope in thinking everything can be done digitally," contributor Jamie Stiehm wrote in *Politics Daily*. "There's nothing like the human hand, writing words on paper, intended for another individual." Dating back to the first postmaster general, Benjamin Franklin, the Founding Fathers knew "correspondence on paper was something sacred in a self-respecting Republic," she argued.

Maybe so. But today the stuff once hauled around in little buggies and pulled out of old sacks is often derided as "snail mail." Fact is, says Tad DeHaven, writing for the libertarian-leaning Cato Institute, the Postal Service is "bleeding red ink because it is becoming less relevant to people's lives because of electronic communication."

Mail volume has gradually declined in the communications age, dropping to 177 billion pieces last year and expected to slip to 150 billion this year.

In the heartland, Victor Dubina, a Postal Service spokesman in northern Ohio, understands that folks in small towns and rural areas feel an attachment to their local post offices. He recently met a postmaster in western Ohio who was appointed by President Truman and was still on the job.

“For whatever reason, in small communities the post office is a focal point, a place where a lot of people come to pick up their mail, ” Dubina said in an interview Wednesday. But of the 32,000 post offices across the country, 26,000 lose money, he said. “What we are faced with is an Internet world with more and more bill-paying on-line and online correspondence. Do you need a small post office or could an automated postal center at a drugstore, or retail counter, or grocery store, suffice?”

Ben Franklin probably wouldn't have wanted to mix mail and groceries. But the Postal Service is determined to go ahead with its five-day delivery plan if it gets approval from Congress and its own Postal Regulatory Commission. The question does not seem to be if — but when.

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